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# The Plausibility of Creationism: A Sociological Comment

Mathew Guest

## Introduction

“If the system of flood geology can be established on a sound scientific basis, and be effectively promoted and publicized, then the entire evolutionary cosmology, at least in its present neo-Darwinian form, will collapse. This, in turn, would mean that every anti-Christian system and movement (communism, racism, humanism, libertinism, behaviorism, and all the rest) would be deprived of their pseudo-intellectual foundation.” (Henry M. Morris, *Scientific Creationism*)<sup>1</sup>

By the mid 1970s, the ‘scientific creationism’ popularised by figures like Henry Morris was well established in the United States. The conviction behind vitriolic statements like the one cited above, that the truth of the Genesis flood account could be proven using the conventional methods of the natural sciences, was no longer merely the stuff of fundamentalist apologetic, but was part of an applied and well resourced scientific agenda. Morris was a trained civil engineer, known during his student days as a gifted mathematician as well as a zealous evangelical who later gained a PhD in hydraulics and geology. He used his scientific knowledge to support his ‘young earth’ creationist beliefs, defending the need for Bible-believing Christians to address the false claims of evolution on scientific grounds. Thus while his famous volume *The Genesis Flood* (co-written by John Whitcomb and published in 1961) was premised on the inerrancy and infallibility of the scriptures, the claims found within Genesis were supported and elaborated using established scientific laws and geological evidence. In this way, the work of Whitcomb and Morris represented an extension of a trend among the pioneers of fundamentalist Christianity who were writing around the turn of the twentieth century. Their reactionary interpretations of Genesis were not pre-modern as such, but reflected the modernist assumptions of the age, so that theological refutations of evolution presented the Genesis account as a series of factual, propositional statements, issuing straightforward and unmediated truth, available for all to see. Later, apologists for the creationist perspective would attempt to treat Genesis as a scientific document, extending its factual status into applications in geology, palaeontology, archaeology and the biological sciences. As a reliable guide to life and its origins, Genesis acquired the additional status of textbook, research guide and historical record. In this sense, the so called fundamentalist resurgence did not represent a yearning for pre-modern Christendom, but a thoroughly modern attempt to defend the integrity of the boundaries of Biblical Christianity. Creationism emerged as a major dimension to this ongoing manoeuvre among the champions of conservative Christianity.

But what was at stake in the efforts of figures like Henry Morris was not just the reliability or otherwise of Darwinian evolution as a means of explaining the origins of life. As the citation above vividly demonstrates, evolution had become associated with all that was wrong with western modernity: materialism, the debasement of humankind, selfishness and ruthless rivalry, the devaluation of life as a gift from God,

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<sup>1</sup> Henry M. Morris (ed.) *Scientific Creationism* (San Diego, CA: Creation-Life Publishers, 1974), p. 252.

and a rejection of the absolute authority of scripture in all things, not to mention the usual *bêtes noires* of the American right such as liberalism and communism. The creationist cause had acquired a strong cultural significance in seeking to defend not just biblical authority, but a way of life, a social order, and a complex set of ideological interests. In this respect, the modern appropriation of Genesis has become a matter not just of biblical hermeneutics, but of cultural identity.

Much of the existing scholarship on the evolution-creationism conflict has been historical and theological, charting the contours of the developing debate or commenting on the merits of emerging perspectives. What follows is a sociological discussion; my concern is not with the validity of creationism, but with how creationist ideas function within the social contexts in which they are affirmed, debated and challenged. Axiomatic to a sociological approach is the assumption that changes in belief may be explained with reference to changes in the social structures of society, and not simply with reference to the ideas and behaviour of individuals. Hence Peter Berger's claim that the religious crises of modernity are not due to "any mysterious metamorphoses of consciousness" but can "be explained in terms of empirically available developments in the social structures and the social psychology of modern societies."<sup>2</sup> My concern in this chapter is to explore how the popularity of creationist ideas within contemporary western cultures may be explained in a similar way. A more specific focus, to use sociological language, is the apparent plausibility of creationism, i.e. how and why the claims associated with creationism are viewed as plausible by those who affirm them.

## **The Genesis of Creationism**

The history of Christian fundamentalism has been characterised by several dramatic controversies which are often said to have played a greater part in shaping the course of this movement than more steady flows of cultural and religious change. In so far as fundamentalism is an essentially reactionary movement, perhaps this is a fair assessment. These controversies certainly continue to influence the contours of fundamentalist identity in that particular issues remain bones of contention and foci for a perennial conflict with modern culture. The evolution-creationism debate is a prime – perhaps *the* prime – case in point. It represents one of the most enduring points of difference between conservative Christianity and western society, and hence generates potent identity markers. This is especially the case in the contemporary USA, in which debates over the respective legitimacy of evolution and creationism continue to inflame the 'culture wars' that divide conservatives from liberals, more so, claims evangelical historian Mark Noll, than any other issue since 1960, except abortion.<sup>3</sup>

Noll is one of the many contemporary evangelical thinkers who lament the fact that the creationism issue has maintained a position of such importance throughout the twentieth century, chiefly because it has contributed to the disengagement of evangelicals from mainstream scholarship to the detriment of its theology. Noll points out that the young earth creationism that has become so popular during the last four

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), p. 155.

<sup>3</sup> Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), p. 192.

decades was not characteristic of conservative Protestant thought at the end of the nineteenth or the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Key conservative figures like James Orr and B.B. Warfield - both of whom wrote for the famous pamphlets published as *The Fundamentals* (1910-1915) and hence were influential within the emerging fundamentalist movement - accepted evolution as a means by which God created the earth. Historian of creationism Ronald Numbers argues that early fundamentalism in the USA viewed higher criticism - which treated scripture as a set of historical documents rather than as the inspired Word of God - as a greater threat to Christianity than evolution. The volumes of *The Fundamentals*, while repeatedly touching on the subject of evolution, offered a variety of perspectives on it. As Numbers comments, "Fundamentalists may not have liked evolution, but at this time few, if any, saw the necessity or desirability of launching a crusade to eradicate it from the schools and churches of America."<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, the roots of creationism lie in nineteenth century millenarianism, especially as maintained by the Plymouth Brethren, who discerned an entire chronology of salvation history in the Biblical texts, from terrestrial origins in Genesis, to predictions of the end times in the Book of Revelation. Such ideas filtered into broader debates about the nature of Biblical truth, and Biblical literalism gradually gained popularity in large part because of its support among scholars at Princeton Theological Seminary. However, Darwinian evolutionary theory did not become a major target of fundamentalist hostility until the 1920s. It is here that controversy and social drama appears to overtake steady processes of change, and the so-called Scopes Monkey Trial is frequently cited as the public spectacle that did most to crystallise the fundamentalist cause. The event took place in Dayton, Tennessee in 1925, when local school teacher John Scopes was tried for teaching biology using a text book – George William Hunter's *A Civic Biology* - that included a positive account of evolutionary theory. The case has become infamous, symbolising a deeper conflict between academia and popular wisdom, between freedom of enquiry and the Bible, and marking out battle lines that remain visible in US public debate almost a century later. What is often overlooked in popular and scholarly accounts is that the Scopes Trial was not a spontaneous expression of insidious cultural tensions, but was a stage-managed public event, orchestrated by advocates of the two opposing sides. Recently passed state law had banned the teaching of evolution in Tennessee schools. The American Civil Liberties Union set up the Dayton trial as a 'test case' aimed at challenging this law as unconstitutional, and advertised for volunteer teachers to stand in the dock (assuring them they would not lose their jobs). The ACLU cause focused on freedom of speech and academic freedom, which they claimed were threatened by the new legislation. Meanwhile, the World's Christian Fundamentals Association were in nearby Memphis, debating why Tennessee taxpayers should permit evolution and modernism to be freely taught at schools when the church-state separation outlawed the reading of the scriptures in the classroom. Hence the pro-Bible faction set themselves up against John Scopes, the willing volunteer teacher, whose case was put by Clarence Darrow, the chief attorney for the defence whose own inclination was to reject Christianity while affirming materialistic evolution.

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<sup>4</sup> Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 53.

The Scopes spectacle and the ripples it caused across the US has been expertly charted in Edward J. Larson's book *Trial and Error*, which corrects popular wisdom in recounting the history of the evolution-creationism debate as complex and multi-faceted, driven by multiple agendas and convoluted interests (for example, the trial coincided with efforts by local leaders who were keen to put Dayton on the map, hence the momentum behind the publicity).<sup>5</sup> The outcome of the trial is well known: Scopes was convicted, but the decision was soon overturned on a technicality. The defence cried foul play, as without a conviction, they could not appeal and hence continue in their very public attempt to prove the law was unconstitutional (thus leaving an open door for other states to pass similar anti-evolution measures). However, the most significant result was the effective discrediting of the anti-evolution movement, ridiculed as backward, ignorant and uneducated by the media, an image made popular in the fictionalised dramatisation of the trial, *Inherit the Wind*, produced in theatres from 1955 and released as a Hollywood movie starring Spencer Tracy in 1960.

What followed was, according to historian George Marsden, a "dark age" for conservative evangelical scholarship as fundamentalists withdrew from public life and, seeking to protect their members from the influence of evolutionary ideas, established organisations over which they could exert strict control. New denominations, church fellowships and Bible institutes emerged as separatism became the fundamentalist norm. This coincided with what has come to be known as the 'Great Reversal'. Newly pessimistic about the human condition following the horrors of the First World War, and highly sceptical of theology tinged with leftist principles following the Russian Revolution of 1917, evangelicals turned away from social reform and instead focused on personal piety and evangelism, portraying the wider culture in increasingly negative terms. Modern science was taken to be representative of this culture, and Marsden associates this period with the genuine polarisation of pro-science and pro-Bible camps.<sup>6</sup> Whereas conservative Protestants had previously allowed some room for argument about the precise status of evolution, the events surrounding the Scopes trial had forced a turn inward, introducing a period of fundamentalist separatism.

A newfound public confidence emerged several decades later, with figures like Ellen G. White and George McCready Price, both Seventh Day Adventists who advanced creation accounts with the deluge centre stage, and later, Whitcomb and Morris's *The Genesis Flood*, which put Price's points more persuasively, not least on account of Morris's scientific expertise. The subsequent popularity of creationism is partly, so Mark Noll argues, down to the massive investment in scientific education by the US government in the wake of the USSR's launch of space shuttle Sputnik in 1957, which generated the production and dissemination of biology textbooks that described the cosmos in evolutionary terms. This was perceived locally as federal interference and the rise of creationist sentiments was one expression of popular protest.<sup>7</sup> Following the consequent textbook controversies of the 1960s and 70s, creationism

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<sup>5</sup> Edward J. Larson, *Trial and Error: The American Controversy over Creation and Evolution* (updated edition) (New York and Oxford: OUP, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), pp. 148-9.

<sup>7</sup> Noll, *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, p. 193.

began to be taken seriously by the wider public, including scientists and educators.<sup>8</sup> Some of these professionals attempted to reconceive creationism on scientific, rather than theological grounds, in order to lend it more credibility among the wider population and as a potential means of getting creationist ideas taught in public schools.<sup>9</sup> This trend has come to be known under the umbrella term of Creation Science, with various efforts to challenge evolution on scientific grounds supported by organisations like the Creation Research Society (est. 1963) and the Institute for Creation Research (est. 1970). Later, Intelligent Design would emerge as a new set of arguments but with the same aim of discrediting evolution as an unreliable or at least insufficient explanation of the origins of life.<sup>10</sup>

Ronald Numbers has pointed out that creationism - rather than persist as a fixed set of ideas - has actually *evolved* throughout the 20th century, taking on different emphases in response to changing cultural challenges and developments among its advocates within conservative Christianity. An early openness and breadth of perspectives gave way to a polarisation of positions after the 1920s, with a fresh engagement with science emerging in the 1960s. However, this engagement has not engendered a straightforward accommodation of creationist arguments to the norms of secular modernity. If anything, in the latter decades of the twentieth century, creationists have become more radical in setting up clear boundaries between the Christian worldview they represent and that represented by ‘the world’ as they see it.<sup>11</sup>

This trend is reflected in the available survey data. In 1991, a Gallup Poll revealed that 47% of US citizens, including 25% of college graduates, believed that “God created man pretty much in his present form at one time within the last 10,000 years.” In 2005, the same organisation, this time using a slightly different wording, found that 53% of Americans agreed with the statement “God created human beings in their present form exactly the way the Bible describes it.” The 6 percentage point increase is more striking because the revised wording arguably suggests a more uncompromising, dogmatically Biblical position than the original, which at least allows for some margin of error.<sup>12</sup> While the evidence is not conclusive, what evidence there is suggests that creationist beliefs have demanded a steadily increasing level of assent within the USA over the past 40 years.<sup>13</sup>

A similar pattern is exposed by an examination of levels of scepticism about evolution. In an international survey of over 30 European countries, plus the USA and Japan, Miller, Scott and Okamoto asked a sample of adults whether they believed in the statement that “Human beings, as we know them, developed from earlier species of animals”. They found that, in 2005, US adults were less likely to accept the concept of evolution than adults in all but one of the nations surveyed. Moreover, drawing from longitudinal data, they found that, over the previous 20 years, the percentage of US adults accepting the idea of evolution had dropped from 45 to 40%, with those unsure about evolution increasing from 7% in 1985 to 21% in 2005. Levels of

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<sup>8</sup> Numbers, *The Creationists*, p. 351.

<sup>9</sup> Numbers, *The Creationists*, pp. 273-5.

<sup>10</sup> See Steve Olson, “Evolution and Creationism: Shapes of a Wedge”, *Science* 7, vol. 304, no. 5672 (May 2004), pp. 825-826.

<sup>11</sup> Numbers, *The Creationists*, p. 370.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Numbers, *The Creationists*, pp. 1, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Numbers, *The Creationists*, pp. 330-331.

acceptance of evolution in France, Iceland, Sweden and Denmark were 80% plus, with 78% for Japan and a figure in the mid 70s for the United Kingdom.<sup>14</sup>

The uptake of creationist ideas in the UK has always been more muted, in part because the fundamentalist controversies were resolved earlier, were less public and less intense, and the very different educational and political institutions of Britain tend to foment popular protest to a lesser degree than their US equivalents. Evidence for its limited appeal can be found in available survey data. By way of illustration, in a survey, published in 2005, of over 7,000 Church of England clergy and laity, Francis et al asked questions about belief in evolution and six-day creation, working with the two statements “God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh” and “I believe that all living things evolved”. The survey revealed that 17% of the laity and 10% of clergy agreed with the first, creationist-style statement, while 67% of the laity and 74% of clergy believed in evolution.<sup>15</sup> Hence, creationism remains the preference of only a small minority, and church leaders actually appear less dogmatic than their congregations on this issue. And yet in recent years, creationism has emerged within public controversies in the British context, as sympathetic agencies have sought to re-introduce ideas of creationism or intelligent design into the school classroom. Most concern has been expressed with respect to newly established City Academies, secondary schools partly funded by private sector benefactors, who thereby achieve some control over the content of the taught curriculum, pupil recruitment and staffing.<sup>16</sup> While this has led to some public outcry, the notion that creationism has achieved significant momentum as an alternative explanatory schema among school children and churchgoers commands only limited evidential backing.

## Plausibility Structures and Cognitive Bargaining

One of the dominant strands within the contemporary sociology of religion is the ‘god of the gaps’ hypothesis: within modernity, religion acquires a social function only in so far as this function is not otherwise fulfilled by non-religious agencies. It is pushed to the margins, concerned mainly with personal, emotional or private concerns, or else caters to existential needs precipitated by cultural crises, which are therefore atypical or pathological, and emerging religious movements rarely directly challenge dominant cultural norms and values.<sup>17</sup> Such is the nature of secularization in the West, as we witness religious movements bending to fit the increasingly diminishing spaces that society allows it to occupy.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Jon D. Miller, Eugene C. Scott and Shinji Okamoto, “Public Acceptance of Evolution”, *Science*, Vol. 313 (5788), 11<sup>th</sup> August 2006, pp. 765-6.

<sup>15</sup> Leslie Francis, Mandy Robbins and Jeff Astley, *Fragmented Faith: Exposing the Fault-Lines of the Church of England* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), p. 153.

<sup>16</sup> Joachim Allgaier and Richard Holliman, “The Emergence of the Controversy Around the Theory of Evolution and Creationism in UK Newspaper Reports”, *The Curriculum Journal*, vol. 17, no. 3, (2006), pp. 263-279. Media coverage of the controversy has largely focused on the schools in North East England supported by prominent evangelical businessman Sir Peter Vardy.

<sup>17</sup> See Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 30-37.

<sup>18</sup> One is reminded of Peter Berger’s comment, that religious consumers living within a secularized society will “prefer religious products that can be made consonant with secularized consciousness over those that cannot.” Berger, *Social Reality of Religion*, p. 145.

The rise of creationism represents a rather different phenomenon, one that does not so easily fit into this pattern. In many forms, it directly undermines mainstream science, challenging the notion that religious groups have conceded the job of explaining the natural world to the secular sciences. In doing this, creationist sympathisers occupy new social space in which their evangelical Christianity may extend its cultural influence, thus working against the structural differentiation that many sociologists have argued is quintessential to the modern condition.<sup>19</sup> Religion is not bound within shrinking pockets of significance, but is breaking out of them. Most strikingly, perhaps, creationism and its associated belief claims appear to be radically incongruent with the modernized consciousness many have argued is dominant within western cultures, and yet is growing in popularity, especially in the USA. In other words, one has to account sociologically for the means whereby creationism is maintained as a plausible set of belief claims within a social context largely hostile to such claims.

In reflecting on this question, it is instructive to turn to the classic work of Peter Berger, who originally coined the term ‘plausibility structures’ within his work in the sociology of religion during the 1960s. While the assumptions behind his arguments are complex, his central claim can be formulated with relative simplicity, and may be summarised here in a quotation from his seminal work, *The Sacred Canopy*, published in Britain as *The Social Reality of Religion*: “Any particular religious world will present itself to consciousness as reality only to the extent that its appropriate plausibility structure is kept in existence.”<sup>20</sup> For Berger, a plausibility structure may take a variety of potential forms, whether a relatively durable institution or a more loosely organised network of discursive exchange. He is not arguing that social structural phenomena have causal priority over ideas, nor vice versa. Rather, his claim is simply that there needs to be some kind of affinity between the two for a body of beliefs and values to remain plausible.<sup>21</sup> Hence Berger’s secularization argument, that religion has declined in social significance because the plausibility structures that once supported it have become fragmented or weakened.

Berger’s later work on religion is concerned with the options available to religious groups which face the secularizing influence of the modern world. How might they preserve their belief systems once they have become a ‘cognitive minority’? One option, so Berger argues, is cognitive retrenchment, i.e. a denial of the validity of the values of secular modernity and a re-affirmation of the whole of a traditional belief system as it stands.<sup>22</sup> In a defensive form, it requires a withdrawal from society, and the creation and maintenance of a closed religious subculture, preserved from the wider society by separation. This is the option most readily cited by Berger, who speaks of the task of maintaining “cognitive deviance” in terms of the construction of “firm plausibility structures.”<sup>23</sup> In *A Rumour of Angels*, Berger is more specific still, arguing that conservative religious groups are best equipped to resist the deleterious

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<sup>19</sup> E.g. see James Davison Hunter, *American Evangelicalism. Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

<sup>20</sup> Berger, *Social Reality of Religion*, p. 149.

<sup>21</sup> Berger, *Social Reality of Religion*, p. 154.

<sup>22</sup> Given the concerns of the current chapter, it is worth noting that so-called ‘deviant science’ – from intelligent design to acupuncture – may be sustained by means of the same social mechanism. See R.G.A. Dolby, “Reflections on Deviant Science”, in Roy Wallis (ed.) *On the Margins of Science: The Social Construction of Rejected Knowledge* (Sociological Review Monographs 27) (University of Keele, March 1979), pp. 27-28.

<sup>23</sup> Berger, *Social Reality of Religion*, p. 163.



influences of modern culture by existing as counter-communities, fostering homogeneity, solidarity among members and a clearly defined set of boundaries that set them apart from the outside world.<sup>24</sup> Historically, this strategy has been relatively popular among Christian fundamentalists, who have often sought refuge from the modern world by withdrawing into separatist or sectarian communities, either through radical separation from society – as with the Exclusive Brethren – or by selectively controlling the extent to which their members are exposed to external influences, as occurred during the ‘Great Reversal’ when fundamentalists in the USA withdrew into their own institutions. A striking example of this trend may be found in the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who, out of fear of evolution and other ‘heresies’, have discouraged their children from attending school beyond that required by law, quite aside from requesting their absence from Religious Education and collective acts of worship. While this might be judged an effective means of sustaining deviant ideas like those associated with creationism, this strategy has arguably been disabling to the creationist cause. As Ronald Numbers notes, in the US context, educational separatism has meant that the Witnesses produced few scientists or educated individuals capable of engaging with the technical aspects of the creationism debate in a sophisticated manner.<sup>25</sup> Withdrawal denies the group the cultural capital with which they may defend and advance their cause in the wider arena, an endeavour that has preoccupied, and arguably vitalised, creationist sympathisers at least since the passionate debates in the southern US states during the early decades of the twentieth century.

There is also cause to question whether, in the contemporary context, the sectarian form of religion described by Berger is sustainable at all. Given the cultural conditions of late modernity - mass communication and the internet, increased global travel and the ubiquity of the televisual media, not to mention increased geographical and social mobility within and between western nations - social isolationism appears more and more an unachievable aspiration. Even if achieved, it is difficult to imagine how it could be sustained over generations. Support for this view is found in Nancy Ammerman’s ethnographic study of fundamentalist Christians within the Southern Baptist Convention during the 1980s. Ammerman finds that creationism is a particularly difficult aspect of the fundamentalist worldview to sustain and for new or young believers to fully accept, given the prominence of evolutionary ideas in the wider world and within school curricula. She suggests that full acceptance may depend on a strong commitment to the other aspects of the fundamentalist worldview.

“To accept on faith that all the scientific evidence is erroneous requires a strong commitment to the other ideas of Fundamentalism. If the issue of evolution arises too early in the process of integration into the fellowship, it can destroy the plausibility of the rest of the world view. In the outside world, discarding evolution is seen as ridiculous. Only when a convert is firmly on the inside do the arguments against evolution make sense. In the early weeks and months, new members may have to put that issue aside, concentrating instead on the ideas and life changes they find acceptable...As converts devote more and more time and energy to religious activities and adopt

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Berger, *A Rumour of Angels. Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (London: Penguin, 1969), p. 32.

<sup>25</sup> Numbers, *The Creationists*, p. 348.

Fundamentalists as their primary reference group, even ideas that are difficult to apprehend become plausible.”<sup>26</sup>

The sociological concept of defensive cognitive retrenchment has only limited value in accounting for how the plausibility of creationist ideas has been sustained during the modern period. Ammerman’s study, among others, suggests that creationist ideas have been taken on gradually, and have not been impervious to change and development at the popular, as well as intellectual, level. The relationship of creationism to the cultural context in which it is expressed and affirmed is not rigid and uncompromising, in spite of the rhetorical claims of its advocates and detractors, but has been complex and subtle, one of cognitive bargaining, rather than cognitive retrenchment.

If the development of creationism reflects a process of ‘cognitive bargaining’, then it is not a process that is unprecedented. Berger himself cites the example of liberal Protestantism during the nineteenth century, which engaged in a “bargaining process with secular thought” after secular intellectuals, rather than other theologians, had become the “arbiters of cognitive acceptability.”<sup>27</sup> The development of creationist thought represents merely another strand in Protestant Christianity’s struggle with the modern age, although here, what is up for negotiation is not the virgin birth or Jesus’ miracles, but the validity of the Genesis account of the origin of the world. This historical comparison must also be qualified in so far as the liberal Protestants were engaging with a culture they felt embodied values worthy of praise – not least Enlightenment rationality and human progress – whereas modern-day creationists have consistently viewed western culture in thoroughly negative terms. Both cases do reflect, however, some accommodation to the cognitive norms of secular modernity. The emergence of Creation Science and of Intelligent Design are prime examples of how the norms and language of mainstream scientific endeavour have been adopted – or at least ostensibly imitated – as a means of garnering credibility for otherwise rather maverick theories. Whether these examples represent a genuine accommodation of the creationist camp to the culture it purportedly opposes, or are better interpreted as a creative negotiation of public discourse which leaves the underlying convictions relatively intact, is a moot point.

## Order and Meaning

One aspect of the popular affirmation of creationism for which there is significant evidence relates to the need for a sense of cosmic order congruent with a fundamentalist perspective on truth. This lies at the heart of Nancy Ammerman’s empirical study of fundamentalist beliefs, which concerns itself with how fundamentalist Christians preserve a clear framework for dealing with the world and one’s place in it and that renders clear one’s religious obligations. Because creationism instils a greater sense of orderliness (in contrast with evolutionary theory, which is associated with random chance) and because it is viewed as biblical, it is well suited for this purpose. Ammerman makes this point in her discussion of how southern Baptists interpret Romans 8:28: “And we know that in all things God works

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<sup>26</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman, *Bible Believers. Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 1987), p. 165.

<sup>27</sup> Berger, *Social Reality of Religion*, pp. 159; 158.

for the good of those who love him, and who have been called according to his purpose.”

“The members of Southside take that verse to mean that God has a purpose for everything and that because they are Christians they will be able to discover and live by God’s orderly plan. Just as they are sure that the universe did not originate by chance evolution, so they are also sure that nothing in today’s world happens by chance either. Believers can know that God causes everything as surely as they know that day follows night and that for everything there is a season.”<sup>28</sup>

Hence creationism embodies the popular Christian affirmation that there is an order and purpose to the world and to human existence, and that this order is ordained by God and revealed in the scriptures. Creationism also functions as an effective fundamentalist identity marker precisely because it is understood over and against evolution, which carries connotations of chance, disorder, and a faith in science – the world – over the Bible.<sup>29</sup> The fact that this quest for order and certainty in an otherwise uncertain world has arguably gained momentum in recent decades evokes descriptions of the postmodern character of contemporary western culture.<sup>30</sup> The projection of a Bible-based chronology onto human history may then be interpreted sociologically as a response to cultural instability, providing a framework of meaning that has clear temporal, as well as theological, boundaries. Perhaps it is unsurprising, therefore, that creationism can often be found alongside apocalyptic as an ideological priority among world-renouncing elements of the Christian community.

In another of the few detailed studies of creationist belief, this time set within the UK context, the role of creationism in instilling a sense of ontological order is illuminated further. Leslie Francis attempted to explore how creationist ideas are viewed by young people. In his survey of 34,000 13-15 year olds in England and Wales, he found that 20% agreed or strongly agreed with the creationist belief that “God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh”.<sup>31</sup> Cross-tabulation with responses to other questions revealed some interesting patterns, including a positive correlation between belief in creationism and belief in a series of other, rather unconventional ideas, including horoscopes, the devil, contacting spirits of the dead and ghosts. Jeff Astley addresses these patterns in the data and argues for associating these beliefs with credulity, i.e. those who believe in creationism are also ready to believe in a wide range of unconventional ideas.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps underlying this is a propensity among some to find plausibility in things counter-cultural, or at least counter to a model of culture they have learnt is to be opposed. The world-denying logic of conservative forms of evangelicalism - often structured around strict dichotomies - lends credence to this underlying pattern, although we might be surprised to find belief in horoscopes and

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<sup>28</sup> Ammerman, *Bible Believers*, p. 41.

<sup>29</sup> Within this context, creationism functions in a similar way to uncompromising opposition to homosexuality, i.e. as an expression of Christian legitimacy: it marks the Christian as different from ‘the world’ and, by the standards of its own tradition, as reliably biblical.

<sup>30</sup> E.g. see Zigmunt Bauman, “Postmodern Religion?”, in Heelas, Paul (ed.) *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 55-78.

<sup>31</sup> Leslie Francis, *The Values Debate: A Voice from the Pupils* (London: Woburn, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> Jeff Astley, “The Science and Religion Interface within Young People’s Attitudes and Beliefs”, in Leslie Francis, Mandy Robbins and Jeff Astley (eds) *Religion, Education and Adolescence: International Empirical Perspectives* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), pp. 39-54.

ghosts openly endorsed within their churches. An alternative explanation might be that those willing to profess belief in creationism are sceptical of the rational scientific worldview and their commitment to things like horoscopes and black magic reflects this scepticism and a concomitant belief in things preternatural. Here, creationism belongs to the same family of beliefs as horoscopes because it expresses a scepticism towards the view that life can satisfactorily be dealt with by reference to purely rational or scientific arguments. According to this argument, creationism might be adopted as part of a complex wider constellation of convictions and interests which represents an alternative worldview (or set of worldviews) from that associated with hard, traditional science, which is sometimes viewed as a threat to religion, and even, among some, as undermining a holistic understanding of selfhood. Eileen Barker advances a similar argument, suggesting that a cultural climate receptive to creationist claims was fostered during the 1960s following a sense of disillusionment with mainstream science. Viewed as cold, overly rational and mechanistic, science failed to resonate with newfound cultural values like spontaneity, humanitarianism and a sense of higher truth beyond the material.<sup>33</sup> In this sense, creationism may have gained credence on the basis of the same set of cultural values as some practices associated with the 'New Age' movement, even though their usual contexts of expression are likely to emphasize their differences.

The above argument rests on a set of assumptions about the grounds of plausibility that break somewhat with Berger's work, or at least interpret his arguments more broadly than is usual. Here, plausibility structures may not necessarily inhere in identifiable social frameworks – for example schools, churches, or relatively coherent patterns of shared discourse among like-minded peers – but may emerge more disparately, from more deeply embedded cultural norms that may exist on a sub-conscious or pre-reflexive level. These structures may become manifest in institutional forms, but they need not entirely depend upon them and, because of their deep embeddedness, are difficult to challenge effectively. Such an understanding of plausibility structures underpins historian George Marsden's astute comments on the development of Christian fundamentalism on either side of the Atlantic. Marsden charts how the revivalist and millenarian traditions of the early nineteenth century were highly influential among evangelicals in the USA and in England, and yet gave way to very different patterns of development in subsequent decades. Most strikingly, the vitriolic and public attacks on evolution which characterised the US movement from the 1920s onwards sustained only very limited sympathy among conservative Christians in the UK. Marsden appeals to a variety of factors in attempting to explain the transatlantic difference, including the geographical peculiarities that render regional cross-fertilization of ideas far slower in the US context, although he has to qualify his argument on account of the fact that the principal centres of the fundamentalist movement were initially urban and northern – not least Princeton Seminary – rather than rural and relatively isolated.<sup>34</sup> Much more persuasive is Marsden's invocation of culturally established traditions of meaning and legitimacy, often rooted in complex expressions of political and religious thought which have subsequently been subsumed into the governing norms of social life. For example, he

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<sup>33</sup> Eileen Barker, "In the Beginning: The Battle of Creationist Science against Evolutionism", in Roy Wallis (ed.) *On the Margins of Science: The Social Construction of Rejected Knowledge* (Sociological Review Monographs 27) (University of Keele, March 1979), pp. 182-184.

<sup>34</sup> George Marsden, "Fundamentalism as an American Phenomenon, A Comparison with English Evangelicalism", *Church History*, vol. 46, no. 2, (June, 1977), pp. 224-5.

cites a predisposition among the nineteenth century English for gradualist ideas, ideas which had shaped the intellectual climate for some time, and which meant the English were more naturally receptive to Darwin's theories (and to higher criticism of scripture, which also rested on an assumption of historical contingency) than the North Americans. By contrast, the newness of the USA demanded a written and rationally defined constitution, which became enshrined in the nation's self-understanding. US revivalism was heavily shaped by the Calvinist tradition, with its predilection for "formulated statements of religious truth", which were invoked as a yardstick of Christian legitimacy, with little or no room for error or ambiguity.<sup>35</sup> The dominant philosophical framework underpinning theological debate and educational process remained the 'common sense realism' of the Scottish Enlightenment, which was based on the assumption that knowledge may be acquired by the individual through direct, unmediated observation of the world. Filtered into popular theological understandings of human experience and the divine therein, this left little room for interpretation or development; as knowledge was plain and evident, so too was the truth of the Bible, unchangeable and timeless in the form it is received. This complex of factors fostered a culture of understanding based around clearly formulated, unchanging truths. Within this context, the gradualist, developmental emphases of Darwinism were not only theologically offensive; they were intellectually and culturally incongruent.

### **Creationism as Engaged Orthodoxy**

An alternative way of viewing creationism is through the notion of 'engaged orthodoxy', formulated by sociologist Christian Smith in his research into contemporary evangelicalism. On the basis of his extensive empirical studies of evangelical Christianity across the USA, Smith has argued for a positive correlation between evangelical vitality and cultural engagement. This orientation he refers to as 'engaged orthodoxy', drawing illustration from the so-called 'new evangelicals' of the 1940s, like Carl F. H. Henry, Charles Fuller and Billy Graham. These influential figures remained "...fully committed to maintaining and promoting confidently traditional, orthodox Protestant theology and belief, while at the same time becoming confidently and proactively engaged in the intellectual, cultural, social, and political life of the nation."<sup>36</sup>

For Smith, key to the evangelical response to modernity is the impulse to draw clear symbolic boundaries, thus distinguishing believers from relevant 'outgroups', including secular culture and other religious traditions. However, this does not lead in the direction of sectarianism. While Berger, and James Davison Hunter in his work,<sup>37</sup> tends to paint religion as a relatively passive force, fending off the forces of modernity from a defensive position, Smith highlights the drives internal to evangelicalism which foster an orientation characterized by *active engagement* with the world. Moreover, this active engagement appears to include a capacity for a strategic re-negotiation of collective identity, in light of the changing socio-cultural

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<sup>35</sup> Marsden, "Fundamentalism", p. 227.

<sup>36</sup> Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism. Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> E.g. see James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

environments that evangelicals confront. In other words, evangelicals *do* accommodate their position in response to cultural change, but part of this process of accommodation involves a revitalization of evangelical identity, not least by focusing on new sources of opposition. Smith contrasts the anti-communism and anti-Catholicism of previous generations with the opposition to moral relativism and homosexual rights in more recent decades. An adjustment is evident, but a strong sense of evangelical identity boundaries remains firmly intact. Moreover, the pluralism characteristic of late modern culture offers evangelicals a favourable environment in which to thrive because it “creates a situation in which evangelicals can perpetually maintain but can never resolve their struggle with the non-evangelical world”.<sup>38</sup> It is this struggle, which previous commentators have often interpreted as an index of weakness, that Smith argues actually generates vitality, reinforcing evangelicalism’s boundaries while at the same time creating opportunities for engagement with a wider culture in need of redemption.<sup>39</sup>

Smith’s analysis is focused explicitly on evangelical Christianity, his arguments only applying to fundamentalism to a limited degree, in part because of a tendency among fundamentalists to withdraw from, rather than engage, with the wider cultural context. Given the association of creationist belief with fundamentalist Christianity, rather than with evangelicalism as such, we might legitimately ask whether Smith’s arguments really apply in this case. Indeed, according to recent studies, creationism commands only limited assent among self-described evangelicals, even in the USA.<sup>40</sup> And yet creationism as we have presented it above is not bound by any particular Christian group, nor is it inextricably entwined within a coherent worldview. Its history suggests a tendency towards dynamic redeployment among resourceful Christians whose cause has been enlivened through their energetic attempts to campaign for a greater public status of creationism in political, educational and civic contexts. It has momentum within the context of power struggles which have a far wider reference than Christian belief, and as such circulates as religious and cultural capital beyond the immediate scope of individual or corporate advocacy. Consequently, I would argue that we stand to learn more about the social significance of creationism by studying its deployment as a means of cultural engagement, rather than as a propositional tenet to which individuals may or may not subscribe.

## Conclusion

In order to illustrate the positive potential of an analysis of creationism from this perspective, I would like to offer three points by way of conclusion, all of which look back to what we know about this phenomenon, while pointing forward to likely future trajectories. First, the cultural engagement embodied within Smith’s model emphasizes the combative character of evangelicalism, the sense of struggle with the world. This is in perfect congruence with the history of creationism, which has been a channel for the affirmation of a strict truth-world dichotomy - undeniably essential to the plausibility of the conservative Protestant perspective - while not, for the most part, withdrawing into strict sectarianism. This is in part due to the fact that, from the

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<sup>38</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, p. 150.

<sup>39</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, p. 89.

<sup>40</sup> James M. Penning and Corwin E. Smidt, *Evangelicalism. The Next Generation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), p. 124.

very beginnings of fundamentalist controversy, creationism was a matter of public education and hence drew in the interests of entire communities. It is not incidental that the issue has arisen in the presumably post-Christian UK within educational debates about proper approaches to biology. Indeed, the recent prominence of passionate atheists within the public arena like Richard Dawkins, Polly Toynbee and Christopher Hitchens will probably ensure that such matters are, for the time being, kept on the national agenda.<sup>41</sup> It is conflict and disagreement, rather than consensus, that feeds the creationist controversy.

Second, the logic of cultural engagement requires a certain lack of resolution, a sense that discussion is in progress, that debate is ongoing. Again, this has characterized the development of creationism in so far as it has remained a highly contentious issue, perhaps inevitably within a modern context. But this tension is also sustained by an epistemological trend at the heart of contemporary conservative Protestantism: that truth is both plain and encoded. *The Plain Truth* is the title of a well known magazine that advocates creationist ideas, and the notion conveyed in its title echoes the common sense realism that so radically shaped the US evangelical tradition. The truth is there for all who will see. In so far as this is the case, the mediatory functions of church, leaders and tradition are bypassed, and this voluntarist tradition is now well established across the western evangelical movement. However, the conditions of late modernity have radicalized it, as the forces of globalization and the mass media have empowered individuals to seek out truth through consumer products they purchase and appropriate according to their own tastes. The interactive possibilities of the internet offer individuals the opportunity to also be the producers of this culture, and the web is now awash with home pages promoting new conspiracy theories, hidden messages in ancient texts, and insidious connections between unsavory power brokers. The popularity of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* as well as the *Left Behind* series have heightened this sense that 'the truth is out there', if only people would see. While creationists might not naturally turn to *The X Files* for answers, they are still exposed to this media-driven ethos, and the market provides them with products that will not offend their Christian sensibilities. This devolved truth-seeking represents a paradox at the heart of contemporary evangelicalism, born out of a dogmatic notion of truth, which is in part pursued within a deregulated religious marketplace. Only by placing cultural engagement at the forefront of our analysis can we hope to unravel the possible future trajectories through which this paradox may evolve.

Third, cultural engagement is a useful perspective because it taps into the nature of creationism as a thoroughly *discursive* form of Christian expression. As driven by combative debate, legal dispute and educational conflict, it is not surprising that creationism appears to us historically as a strand of fundamentalist affirmation characterized by complex and impassioned rhetoric. And yet this trend runs deeper, into the theological affinities of the early movement. Ronald Numbers notes that, during the 1960s, theologians in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition tended to remain faithful to the gap and day-age readings of Genesis 1, rather than switch allegiance to the increasingly novel Genesis flood geology associated with authors like Whitcomb and Morris, in contrast with many Baptists, Adventists and Lutherans, who expressed more sympathy with the new ideas.<sup>42</sup> Why this should be is uncertain, although the

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<sup>41</sup> Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason and the War on Religion* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> Numbers, *The Creationists*, pp. 337; 345.

established theological tensions between Pentecostals and more Reformed Protestants may have been a contributing factor, with a continuing distrust between the two parties lending neither any strong inclination to adopt the other's peculiar identity markers. Pentecostals appeared predisposed, because of their experiential, conversionist focus, to prioritise evangelism and celebration over the discursive engagement with science and worldly questions which so attracted those conservative Protestants preoccupied with matters of doctrine. This synergy appears so strong that one might venture to suggest that the future of the creationist cause may in part depend on whether a Reformed, conservative evangelicalism maintains a dominant place among theologians, church leaders and the active laity, not to mention the more nebulous 'grass roots' forces at the popular level in virtual and off-line reality. That this tradition appears in the ascendancy within the UK context<sup>43</sup> raises interesting questions about the future of creationism and its capacity as a cultural force within a society typically suspicious of conservative religion.

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<sup>43</sup> See Mathew Guest, *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture: A Congregational Study in Innovation* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), pp. 212-217.